



## THE FIRST FLIGHT ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

MITSCHER AND BARIN

**M**EANWHILE, back at Chatham, the NC-4 was being readied for another try. On the 13th the forecast indicated an early departure the following morning. Then a starter on one of the engines broke. Since there were no spares on Cape Cod, a call was placed to Rockaway and, within an hour, a New York seaplane was dispatched to Montauk with the parts. The plan was to send a plane from Chatham to make the pickup at Montauk, but before this seaplane could get into the air, it ran afoul of a sand bar. So a Chatham blimp was sent. Not long after the big airship had departed, Chatham received a call that the Rockaway plane had arrived at Montauk and was prepared to continue on to the Cape. Although it was already dark, Read told them to proceed. Under a midnight moon, the seaplane arrived and in went the starter. At daybreak, the NC-4 was ready, and at about the same time Read saw the poor old Chatham blimp come back from its all-night, wild goose chase.

They made the run to Halifax but still had trouble. The newly installed center engine vibrated badly and the two outboard ones were running rough, with dirt in their carburetors. Read was afraid that if they took the time to change an engine again, the other planes might get away from Newfoundland without him. Breese and Rhoads did what they could and, on the morning of the 15th, the NC-4 left Halifax.

Within a few minutes, 18 miles out, they were back on the surface, where a piece of rubber was found in the fuel line. Blockage had starved the motors. The engineers cleaned out the carburetors, replaced a spark plug and, just after noon, off they went again.

Fortunately, the flight to Trepassey

was swift. As a favoring tail wind hurried the NC-4 along, the temperature dropped steadily and ice began to form on the struts. Whenever Read stood up and leaned forward to make a sighting through his drift indicator, a frigid blast tore at his face and hands. He was wearing two suits of heavy underwear, a flannel shirt, a jersey and his winter uniform, all beneath the heavy, fleece-lined leather flying suit. Still he was cold, even when crouching in the hull, out of the wind, and the other men were chilled through.

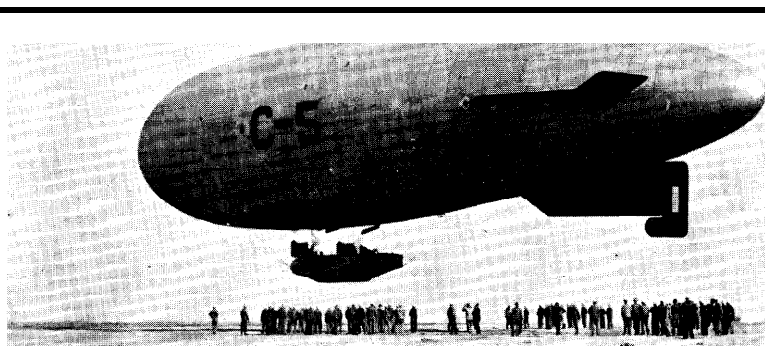
Two hours out of Trepassey, Read spotted something moving just above the icebergs. When he looked down at it through his binoculars, he was amazed to find it was an airship, blowing out to sea, apparently out of control. It was certainly a curious

thing to see in that part of the world, and he wondered where it came from.

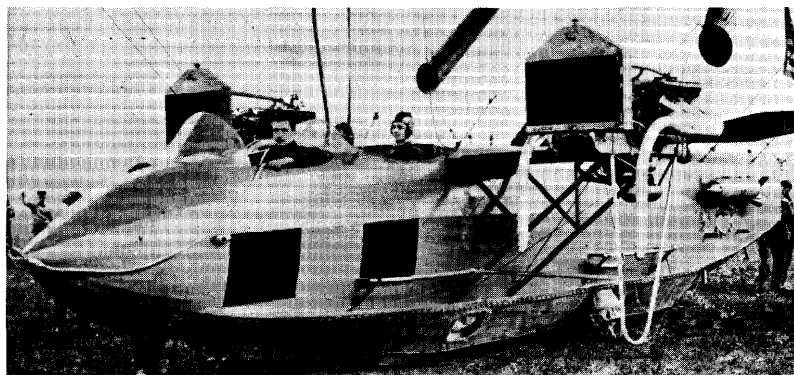
That morning, the C-5 had arrived in St. John's. The press had first learned of the scheme to fly the Navy airship across the Atlantic when the USS *Chicago* had steamed into St. John's harbor to act as base ship. A mooring site had been prepared on the shores of Quidi Vidi Lake, and the cylinders of hydrogen stacked nearby had been a dead giveaway.

The C-5 had flown, in secret, all the way from Montauk, a good indication of her ability to cover long distances. As her tired crew relaxed aboard the *Chicago*, mechanics set to work on her engines. It was then that the perverse Canadian weather served up a sudden afternoon storm and high winds struck the field where the C-5 was tied. Lines began to snap and, before the blimp could be deflated, she was torn loose, men leaping from the power car. Unmanned, she bobbed out towards the sea, never to be found.

Read had another surprise coming. At dusk, as the NC-4 rounded Powell's Point, his blood ran even colder. For



*Ace in the hole - a long-range airship!*



**THE FOUR-MAN** C-5 was a 192-foot non-rigid airship with a 40-foot control car slung beneath her. With two 125-hp engines, she had the range to fly the Atlantic.

there within the bay the NC-1 and NC-3 were maneuvering for takeoff. Read perched in the bow, waving his arms, shrieking in the wind for them to wait for him.

As it turned out, his fears of being left behind were short-lived. True, Towers was attempting a start for the Azores without the NC-4, and, in fact, had been trying all afternoon, but for some reason neither the NC-3 nor the NC-1 could get off the water in the crosswind. Read knew why and chuckled as Jim Breese explained something they'd kept to themselves. The gauges on the fuel tanks were inaccurate and, unless a man knew how to interpret the readings on the glass, it was likely that too much fuel would be taken on board. The extra weight prevented lift.

And so the group was reunited. The reporters had been having fun filing amusing stories about the Americans bashing about the harbor to and fro, crews drenched in ice water as the wallowing big boats made futile efforts to rise into the sky. But now the NC-4 was here, no longer the Lame Duck.

The crew from the *Aroostook* labored mightily and installed a brand new *Liberty* engine. Fuel and oil lines were carefully cleaned and three new propellers were put on. By dawn all was ready, and things were looking up for the great hop to the Azores — up for all except Dick Byrd, whose dream was wobbling out across the ocean with the C-5.

It was during this time that Lt. Louis Barin, Mitscher's copilot on the NC-1, slipped on his *Nancy's* icy hull and in falling, plunged his arm through her thin plywood skin. No bones were broken but it was a painful injury.

Read would have appreciated an extra day to test out the new engine but the weather forecast for the trip was too encouraging. Fog and rain showers at the destination were expected to clear up and, if they waited longer, the British teams might get their chance at Ireland. Thus, in the late afternoon, the three NC's taxied in the harbor, warming up engines.

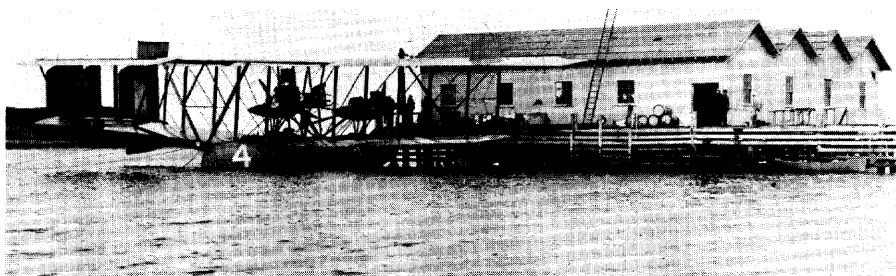
As the NC-3 began to surge ahead, the NC-4 put on full power, and they headed down the bay. By the time

Read noticed that Towers was slowing down, the NC-4 was already airborne. At least he had a good excuse to check out all the systems so he kept on climbing. The others had aborted.

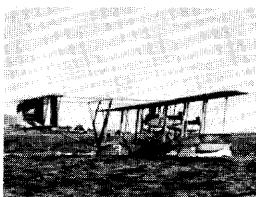
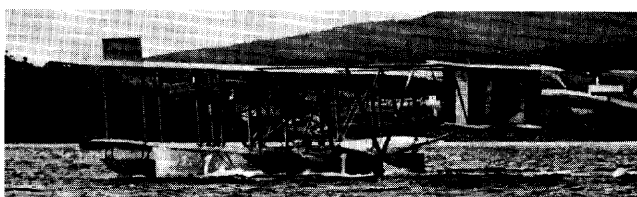
As he watched the NC-4 circle overhead, Towers was exasperated. Again he tried to get the NC-3 off and failed because of overweight. Something had to go. Signalling to the *Aroostook's* boat to come alongside, he offloaded the 26-pound CG-1104 emergency transmitter, a box of tools, a small wooden chair — and his chief flight engineer.

Read landed again and taxied over to the sister ships. All three took up position far back in the harbor, near the Trepassey wharf. At 6:00 P.M. they started once again. Thundering down the inner harbor, the pilots fought a severe crosswind but managed to be planing by the time they hit the swells beyond Powell's Point. Bouncing across the crests they took to the air, the NC-4 most easily of all.

On the 16th of May, the sun was red in the western sky as American hopes flew eastward into the darkness.



**AT TREPASSEY**, new engine and propellers were installed on the NC-4. At lower left, Capt. Tombs, *Aroostook* C.O., wishes luck to Bellinger, Richardson and Towers. Abortive takeoff attempts delayed them, but all NC's finally succeeded the evening of May 16.



Cdr. Ted Wilbur